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ABSTRACT

Ranken Technical College, a small, private, non-profit, two-year technical college in St. Louis, developed a plan whereby at-risk students would be flagged, their needs assessed, and programs put into place to meet those needs. The desired result was a higher retention rate, especially among minorities. The following components were found to be essential to the drop-out prevention program: (1) an extended orientation; (2) a freshman survival course; (3) identification of at-risk students; (4) assessment of at-risk students; (5) specific prescriptions for remediation of weaknesses; (6) collaboration among faculty, staff, and administration; (7) immediate, consistent, and on-going feedback among Learning Resource Center specialists, faculty, tutors and students, and, when necessary, administration and staff; (8) the ability to respond immediately to perceived trends; and (9) the flexibility to make ongoing changes in the program itself. The entire program works because the whole college is involved in the effort. A community of relationships and bonds for the students have been created for the students. (RS)

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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO STUDENT RETENTION

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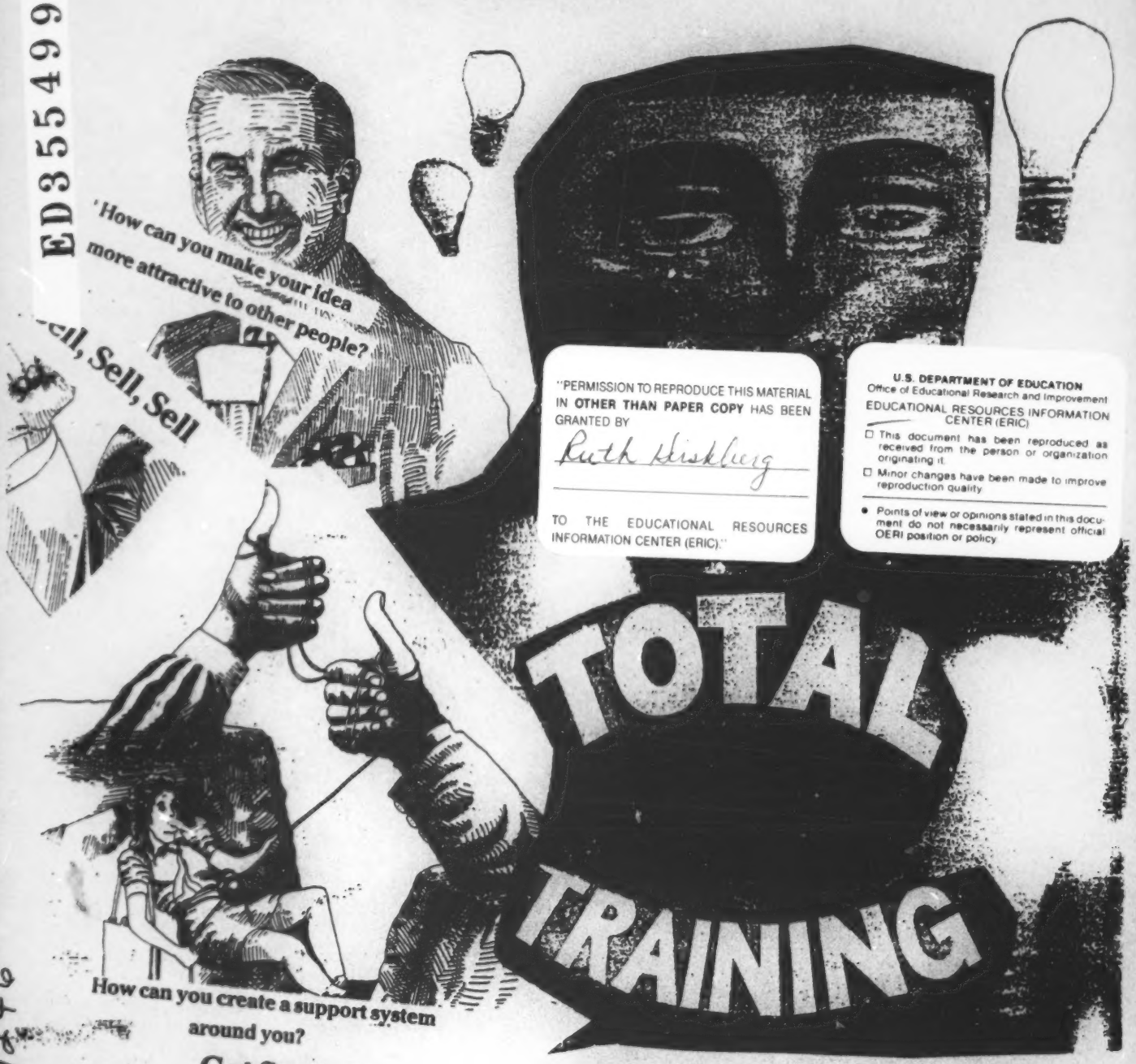
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A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO STUDENT SUCCESS

OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

Ranken Technical College is a small, private, non-profit, two year technical college, founded in 1907. It is supported by tuition, an endowment fund and corporate and private donations. The college is responsible to a board of directors made up of prominent local business executives who are very concerned with student retention. The basic mission at Ranken is to prepare students to enter the work force with a solid education in technical skills, general education, and work ethic. We focus on developing the whole student.

Ranken is North Central Association accredited and offers Associate of Technology degrees in eleven different major fields such as Industrial Electronics, Automotive Maintenance Repair, and Refrigeration/Air conditioning/Heating Repair. We have approximately 700 day school full time students and 700 day and evening part time students. The school population consists of 70% white males between the ages of 18-21, 15% white males over 21, 11% minorities, and 4% women. The full time faculty numbers 50 and the school serves a geographic area consisting of a 90 mile radius around the metropolitan St. Louis area.

As part of its work ethic component of education, Ranken has an attendance policy which requires that a student attend regularly and be punctual. The policy requires dismissal of students who are absent more than 54 clock hours of school during an academic year and/or students who are absent/tardy more than six hours in any course . Ranken also has a very high standard of behavior and a student is dismissed for not complying with the College's rules on dress, haircut, or behavior, such as cheating or theft.

For several years, Ranken has had a number of facilities and programs, such as a Learning Resource Center, a student orientation, and a faculty orientation, to aid in student retention. However, during the 1990-91 school year, administration and student support personnel noticed that many students were dropping out for reasons that were unknown to them. Retention went from an average of 69.4% for the years 1985-89, to a low of 63% for students starting in 1990. In addition, minority retention was approximately 20% lower compared to non-minority retention. The administration became very concerned with this, and as a result, they conducted a comprehensive study in order to identify the problem and decide what could be done to alleviate it. The scope of the study included: 1) reasons students leave the institution before graduation, 2) how entering abilities impact student retention, 3) where, academically, minority retention rates differ from the rest of the College, and 4) ideas for further study and action.

It was discovered that there were four main categories in which to classify students who do not persist until graduation: Academic Dismissal 15.4%, Attendance Dismissal 3.7%, Personal Reasons 9.4%, and Disciplinary Dismissal .5%. The retention study produced a substantial amount of data. Some of the results were that students who had less than an eighth grade reading level had less than a 50% chance of graduating, and that students who scored under 19 on the ACT-CPAT had a 20% higher rate of dropout than those who scored above 19. In addition, it was found that the first term math grade at Ranken had a significant correlation to graduation rates. Those earning less than a "B" had a 50% graduation rate, whereas, those with a "B" or higher had a 94% graduation rate. The complete study results can be obtained by writing to the college.

Before this study was conducted, the Academic Dean approached the Learning Resource Center(LRC) specialist to investigate the existing developmental program and it was found that the majority of the students who dropped out had never been to

the LRC. It was then determined that a plan should be developed whereby we could be certain that the at-risk students would be flagged, their needs assessed and programs would be put into place to meet these needs. The desired result was a higher retention rate, especially among minorities. The LRC specialist targeted a population of at-risk students to work with, and the following program was developed to meet these requirements.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The first step was to form a perspective and a concept of retention as a cooperative effort involving the entire staff, faculty and administration of the college. The concept had to be based on the premise that greater retention did not mean lowering the standards of the institution and that retention was not one person's or one department's sole responsibility. With this in mind, we looked at what we had in place and why it wasn't working, and then went on to develop a workable holistic approach to student retention.

Student Orientation

New student orientation was already in place, so we looked at it from this new holistic perspective. Rather than having one person plan the traditional, fall orientation program by themself, as we had in the past, we enlisted the cooperation of the entire school and requested that everyone play an assigned role in it. Faculty were asked to proctor tests and administer student surveys including a Learning Styles Inventory. In addition, all teachers were enlisted to present a specific orientation in their own departments. A free lunch and social hour was built into the day so that teachers and new students would have a place to introduce themselves to one another in a less

formal setting so that they could begin to form bonds and/or mentoring relationships. Administrators were also asked to present seminars on work ethic and an overview of the college. The president of the college introduced himself to all students in small group settings. The counselor was given time to present information on drug awareness and the services available through the counseling center. Students also had the opportunity to see the LRC and be briefed on the student support services available to them there, such as tutoring and study groups. They had previously been sent a letter of introduction by the LRC specialist in the orientation information mailed to them over the summer. The financial aid office, registrar's office and the bookstore remained open late on orientation days in order to service new students.

Some of the results we observed from this fresh approach were: an expanded orientation (from one day to two); students were introduced to more services available to them, such as counseling, tutoring, and financial aid; administration played a more active role with the students; and students came away with the feeling that the faculty, staff and administration really did care about their success and were available to help them reach their goal of graduation.

Freshman Survival Course

In an effort to increase retention, Ranken instituted, for credit, a mandatory student survival course 5 years ago. All incoming students are required to take this 1 credit, 20 clock hour course regardless of their entrance exam scores or the fact that they may have taken a similar course at another college. Topics covered by the course include goal setting, time management, note taking, memory techniques, textbook reading skills, test taking skills and library skills. In addition, students are exposed to life skills such as taking charge of your own destiny, getting out of the victim mode and detaching from ineffective attachments. The main textbook used in the

course is Becoming a Master Student by David Ellis. The text is printed by a company which specializes in the freshman year experience and student retention, College Survival, Inc. The company provides workshops and conferences for teachers using the text, and several of our teachers have attended. The course serves as an introduction to college, and teachers are trained to spot weak students immediately and refer them to the Learning Resource Center.

Study Skills Across the Curriculum Program

Topics from this freshman survival course are then brought into the major subject area classrooms under a new Study Skills Across the Curriculum program developed by the LRC as an outgrowth of the retention study findings. This consists of a variety of seminars and workshops concerning reading, note-taking, test-taking and so forth, that are customized according to the particular teacher's content area requests. In this way, students get the chance to see how specific study techniques apply to the actual classes they are taking. We have obtained positive feedback about these seminars from both students and instructors in the form of evaluation sheets and in improvement in students' grades. We believe that they work due to the combined efforts and cooperation between departments.

At-Risk Program

The LRC specialist started the SMART STOP (Study, Math and Reading Techniques--Skills To Open Possibilities) Program for students who were targeted as at-risk. She examined the entering student list obtained from the admissions office during the summer of 1991, and developed an at-risk category of students which consisted of all entering students who were older than 18, minorities(11% of

population at Ranken), women(4% of population at Ranken) and students who scored 28-32 on the Nelson Denny, 17-20 on the ACT-CPAT, and 19-22 on the Wonderlic. These were the lowest range of scores a student could attain and still be admitted to Ranken. It was felt that these students might be at-risk of failing at Ranken. The list of at-risk students was organized according to technical majors and sent to each department head for distribution to instructors. Instructors were told that these students "might" need extra help because they fell into one or more at-risk categories. When the instructors received their lists which included 50% of their students, they were angry, confused, and frustrated. The unsettled atmosphere within the faculty led to an in-service training in which teachers were trained to identify "at risk" students by observation of certain behavioral traits. They also learned how to fill out LRC referral forms on which they noted observations and concerns, including study habits, time management skills, test taking skills and quiz and test scores. The instructors discussed the referral in a non-judgemental, supportive, but realistic, manner with the student and then sent him with a copy of the referral to the LRC. Thus, we had established the ground work for a cooperative effort between instructor, student and LRC specialist to address the students' individual needs in a prescriptive, open, supportive fashion.

GATHERING SUPPORT FOR THE PROGRAM

We started with a non-supportive, almost adversarial faculty and staff. It was difficult to turn that around, but we did have the support of the Academic Dean, who gave us the freedom to develop the program and advocated it to the rest of the administration of the college. The primary advantage of retention efforts from their perspective was the fact that each student lost represented a substantial loss of revenue to the college which could not be made up by any other means and a

potential loss of their employment. Students began to express their gratitude for the program as the year progressed. At this point, the administration actively started to support and encourage the program's development. They set up faculty and staff workshops which we conducted. We explained the program and how important faculty and staff cooperation and participation was to its success. Also, the LRC specialist was meticulous about giving immediate feedback of assessment results, conversations with students, attendance to the student's individual education plan, and attitude to the instructors. With instructors' increased participation, successful student results were even more dramatic and this produced more enthusiasm for the program. It was a snowball effect.

IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION

Our collaborative goal was to help students achieve "their goal" of graduation. In most cases, the students' reactions to this type of help is responsive and cooperative. After a student is referred to the LRC by a faculty or staff member, by means of a referral form, the LRC specialist has an informal interview with the student in which they discuss the student's goals, time management, study habits, math and English background. If further testing is required to pinpoint competency deficits, the student is given the TABE test, which is a Missouri state test of 50 basic GED competencies. We evaluate each student on 50 basic skills on one of four levels of difficulty. Each competency can be remediated with a self-directed computer-based lesson which includes quizzes, tests and printouts of student results including scores and learning habits such as how he uses his time . Students are also given the LASSI inventory for study skills and a learning styles inventory. The purpose of the study skills inventory and the LSI is to help students learn more about how they learn best and to encourage them to use their well developed skills as they work to develop and

learn new skills. Our goal is to show students how to become lifelong learners who are confident in their ability to approach new materials.

Next, the LRC specialist and the student create a learning contract for the student which details the learning objectives, the resources and materials needed, the time frame to completion, the evidence of completion, and the criteria for evaluation. Students are also introduced to a peer tutor, a second year student who has a 3.0 or above GPA to work with on a committed schedule. The peer tutors are selected from recommendations by their instructors. They are carefully trained by the LRC specialist to be open, approachable, encouraging, and goal directed. They keep records on each student they tutor and have periodic conferences with the LRC specialist about each student's progress. Moreover, students are introduced to study groups which have a student leader, a time schedule, and a format with which to study. If the group increases their GPAs, they are sent a letter of congratulation by the dean. In addition, they can win a cash award of $50 per member if the group GPA is the highest of all the study groups and if the group has met consistently with all members in attendance a minimum of three times per week. We have noted that students who were in study groups got a .5 to a 1.0 higher GPA than students in the same at risk categories who did not participate in study groups.

At the half way point of the trimester, if a student is failing, he/she is alerted by means of an academic warning. Unlike an LRC referral, which is voluntary remediation, when the student is issued an academic warning, he is counseled by the Assistant Dean of Students and the LRC specialist and is <u>required</u> to commit to a remedial plan of action. This might entail hours in the Math Lab, working with a peer tutor, or joining a study group. At this point in the trimester, the student has no choice about his compliance to a plan because if he refuses, he will be dismissed from school. If a student complies with his remedial plan, he has an opportunity to take a retest if he fails the class in which he received an academic warning. If not, he is not

allowed to take a retest and he must retake the class.

A database about the students is kept with the following information: student's name, class, major, home phone, "at risk" category, LRC referral date, reason for referral, academic warnings and instructor/s referring. In addition, the student's attendance to his remediation plan is also tracked on the database. A record of dropouts is also kept and checked against this database. The first trimester result of the Learning Center effort was an 84% retention rate of all students who went through the program. By the end of the second term, the rate had increased to 93%, and by the third term, it was 97%.

It was noted that minority students had a lower retention rate because of poor math skills. As a result of that statistic, and the finding that math is a strong indicator of student success at Ranken, a 10 day summer math review program was created, and minority students, as well as other entering students weak in math, (identified by the entrance exam) were invited to attend free of charge. In addition, we opened a year round math lab with peer tutoring in algebra and physics, using a multi-media approach to remediation in the fall of 1992. So far , it has been noted that weak students who attended the summer program have a higher grade in math than weak students who did not attend.

By the 30-day academic warning point during the first term of 1992, we had 65 academic warnings as compared to last year's figure of 122. A plan for students needing help was created within 48 hours and the number of math and physics referrals dropped from 60 to 18. The number of students who dropped out was 13 versus 28 at the same time last year and none of the dropouts have been due to academic reasons, but rather have been personal or attendance related. The overall retention rate going from first term into second term is 11% higher than it has been in the last three years. It is difficult to conclude that the higher retention rate was a result of the LRC SMART STOP alone. Instead, we believe that the success is a combination

of the program design and the renewal of interest and enthusiasm in the area of retention from the faculty, staff and administration.

Part of this interest and enthusiasm was sparked by the fact that during the summer of 1992, each department was asked to write a retention plan specific to their field. One of these retention recommendations was early referral to the LRC. It was determined that if a student had an 80% or below average after the first 15 days of the term, the instructor would recommend remedial help. A monthly meeting was instituted between the department and the LRC specialist to discuss the progress of students who had been referred for help and any other issues that might come up. Another outgrowth of these meetings was the study skills across the curriculum program mentioned earlier. Instructors agreed to mentor certain students who were having difficulty working in the study groups. In addition, any student who missed more than three hours in his major would be referred to the LRC for help. Another department came up with the idea of a second year-first year student mentoring program for academic and socialization purposes. These same instructors want to have a banquet to reward the buddy system. The idea to give students extra points in their work ethic grade for being in a study group was implemented by some departments. In addition, instructors became available before and after school for extra help sessions. In some departments, instructors posted their free hours to be accessible to students. The whole idea of instructors caring gave the students a more positive attitude.

We are now ending the second term of our second year into the program. The college previously had a policy which stated that if a student failed a course, he could automatically take a retest. If he passed the retest, he would pass the course with the grade of "D." As a response to the success of students who utilized the LRC services, the administration recently changed the policy to state that a student must show evidence of following his plan in the LRC in order to earn the opportunity of taking a

retest. This new policy has been an incentive for students to visit both the math lab and the LRC on a regular basis and an incentive for instructors to refer marginal students in greater numbers for services. In fact, it has increased the number of LRC referrals and academic warnings by as much as 50%. Our expectation is that with such early referrals of students with marginal problems, we will be able to help more students in 1993.

CONCLUSIONS

We have found the following components to be essential to our drop out prevention program: 1) an extended orientation, 2) a freshman survival course, 3) identification of at-risk students, 4) assessment of at-risk students, 5) specific prescriptions for remediation of weaknesses, 6) collaboration between faculty, staff and administration, 7) immediate, consistent and on-going feedback between LRC specialist, faculty, tutors and students, and when necessary, administration and staff, 8) the ability to respond immediately to perceived trends, and 9) the flexibility to make ongoing changes in the program itself. In addition, we have found that peer tutoring, faculty mentoring, study groups, and an action tracking database for outcomes is successful.

One exciting outgrowth of our program has been a significant donation to fund the development of a Ranken Access Program (RAP), which is a bridge program between high school or work and Ranken that develops skills in the areas of academics, work ethic, study skills and technical skills. Other by-products are better academic advising and more attention to student goal setting and career counseling.

The entire program works because the whole college is involved in the effort. In addition to the academic help that we have provided for students, we believe we have created a community of relationships and bonds for them, unique in a commuter

college environment, which help to keep them in school. Also, we believe that this collaborative environment can be created by opening lines of communication and continuing to be responsive and empathetic to individual needs . We found that when we had uncooperative instructors or staff members, it was because we didn't provide a way for them to see that if they did cooperate they would have a student with a more positive attitude and better grades. When they saw the value of his effort, they became team players. Of course we do not have everyone's enthusiastic support, but everyone does work with us. The instructors that are our best advocates in the LRC efforts are the ones whose students have participated in the program and have persisted in school.

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